

Chapter 6

Organizational intelligence and the inclusion of students with special learning needs

“We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win...”

President John F. Kennedy, 1962

Like President Kennedy, schools that embrace the journey towards including students with special learning needs do so not because it is easy, but because it is hard; because the goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills; and because that challenge is one we are willing to accept, unwilling to postpone, and in which we intend to succeed.

In short, the thoughtful and planned inclusion of students with special needs will serve to enhance our collective intelligence. In this chapter, we will explore the relationship between rigorous challenges, group learning and growth of organizational intelligence. We will also examine how intelligent schools are sensitive to today’s environment, monitoring and adapting to the changing student demographics in schools.

Whereas in previous decades, parents with children who had special learning needs were hesitant to take them abroad, parents today are expecting their children to be served and educated in international schools.

Finally, we will examine the benefits of collaborative interdependence between and among schools as we support the learning of children with special needs. Even if we don't have all the answers, our creativity, thoughtfulness and expertise are strengthened through our collaboration with others within the school and throughout the global community.

More than a decade into the 21st century, there are still many international school leaders (and thus, many international schools) who make decisions not to admit students with special learning needs. Some of the learning needs may involve mild to moderate learning disabilities or other developmental disabilities that make learning in traditional classrooms more challenging – for teachers as well as for students.

Some of the student applicants may also have severe learning needs, which do require intensive support. Ironically, to our knowledge, no child has ever been refused admission because s/he was too bright or intelligent for the school. Having said that, we know that truly gifted children are also often fragile learners and require learning support. Generally, children who have been and continue to be denied admission are those whose learning patterns and practices (or simply the lack of appropriate professional support) have resulted in poor academic reports.

Why we say “no” to children

When asked for the rationale behind their decision to deny admission to certain students, school leaders have given answers that include the following:

“Because we don't have to. We're a college preparatory school.” “We don't have a program for children with such learning needs.” “We can't be all things to all people.” “There are other schools that are better equipped to handle such students.”

“If we accepted children like these, we might get a reputation for being a special needs school.”

“The other international school in this city is the ‘soft, fuzzy’ option. We're the rigorous and academic school.”

“We choose not to.”

“It would be morally wrong to accept a child for whom we do not have a program.”

For the expatriate parent, a school’s decision not to admit their child(ren) may mean having to make a choice between a career and a child’s education. Sometimes, schools have added insult to injury, by deciding that only some children from a single family – not all – are to be admitted, saying, “Well, we just don’t have a program for your other child.”

The resulting confusion and consternation on the parts of the parents are not hard to imagine. Our colleague, Kevin Bartlett from the International School of Brussels, asks questions that resonate: “What gives us the right to cherry pick which children, from which families, we might admit? What gives us the right to select only those who will provide us with the least challenge?”

Admittedly, the admission of any child with special learning needs requires thoughtful planning and careful consideration in all aspects of school life, not just the student’s schedule of classes or assignment of teachers. We would want to review such an admissions case in light of the faculty’s expertise and its *will to serve*, and the environment of welcome that might be extended to these students.

We would also want to make sure that student admissions in this area is *managed*, that we don’t exceed our capacity to serve children well. In short, the inclusion of students with special learning needs requires a thoughtful re-examination of our identity as an educational organization.

We need to reflect on our collective purpose and mission. This is transformational learning that addresses a real and pressing adaptive challenge. If we’re not yet where we want to be as an institution, how might we get there? What steps might we need to take to further realize our desired identity?

In other words, the thoughtful inclusion of students with special

learning needs is one very practical and explicit way of enhancing a school's organizational intelligence. By challenging ourselves to do more than what we are already comfortable doing, we engage in a rigorous exercise of collaborative inquiry that supports our collective intellectual growth and social and emotional development. Taking the easy option isn't going to get us there.

Many years ago, when Bill began his tenure as headmaster at the International School of Kuala Lumpur (ISKL), a family applied for admission. Being responsible and prepared parents, they sent their children's applications and supporting documents well ahead of time. There was a stumbling block: Peter (not his real name), who was applying for grade two admission, had recently been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome.

Despite his high IQ scores, Peter was performing as an average student and intensive support was needed to ensure success in school. Previous school records reflected teacher anxiety and stress in getting Peter's cooperation. At the admissions committee meeting, all factors were discussed and the elementary school guidance counselor weighed in with his opinion.

"My heart goes out to Peter and his family, but it would be cruel for us to take him. He really should stay in Fairfax County, Virginia, where he is sure to get the kind of help he needs. His parents would be irresponsible to bring him here, to this school, in this country, where sufficient support is unavailable."

Around the table, Bill noticed many members of the admissions committee nodding their heads in agreement. He realized, at that particular time in the school's development, that Peter was not going to be able to succeed, because many of the adults who would have been responsible for his support and success really didn't want him there! As a school, ISKL had not yet developed the *will to serve*. Reluctantly, Bill conveyed the decision to the parents that ISKL was unable to serve Peter and he was denied admission.

Four years later, the same family re-applied for the admission of their

two children to ISKL. It was a very different admissions committee that met this time. Each member of the admissions committee had come prepared and well-versed in Peter's case, and around the table individuals were asking questions like, "How can we make sure that Peter will succeed at ISKL?" "What supports do we need to put into place to serve him best?" "How can we make sure during breaks and lunch times that someone will check in with Peter to make sure he's OK?" "How might we prepare the teachers to make sure they know what to expect, and how they might approach him best?"

Clearly, the group was working towards establishing collaborative norms to support Peter, and it was evident that they were working towards admitting Peter and putting into place a plan to support his success in school.

Peter was admitted into grade six at ISKL. As often happens in cases like this, Peter's mother ran for the board of directors and was elected. Soon after her election, she made an appointment to see Bill. The purpose of her meeting was personal. Peter's mother said, "Bill, four years ago, you were the head of this school that denied admission to my son Peter. Four years later, we applied again, and this time, as head of this same school, you admitted him. Peter hasn't changed. Why wasn't he admitted the first time?"

Bill responded by saying, "Peter may not have changed, but in the last four years, the school has undergone a great change, and we have moved a long way towards becoming a more inclusive and more welcoming school. We're a different school from the one you applied to four years ago."

Schools can change. Teachers and school leaders can make the decision to become smarter in their work with all students, including those with special learning needs. Teaching faculties can develop expertise. We can all develop a will to serve. This represents the crucial intersection of technical and adaptive challenges, where informational learning supports and complements transformational learning.

What happened at ISKL in the intervening years was the experience of

uncovering our capacity to succeed with special learners. Some of this was thrust upon the school by the court system in Malaysia, and others by our own realization that we were developing expertise and self-confidence in this area simultaneously as we developed a will and a passion to serve. We will shortly meet Amit and Ben, who were instrumental in helping ISKL develop a collective growth mindset. Their stories illustrate how students can serve to inspire and support the growth of organizational intelligence.

When we examine why a school might choose to deny admission to a child with special learning needs, several reasons emerge:

A fear of the unknown – how the admission of a child with learning needs will impact the culture of the school.

A fear of failure – the teachers', the school's and the students'. Anxiety in respect to overly demanding parents. Concern about how teachers will feel. A lack of expertise or knowledge in working with diverse learners.

A lack of clarity surrounding the roles and responsibilities of the faculty, the administration, the parents, the student, and the community in working with children who learn differently – who is responsible for what?

A mis-conception that accepting students with special needs will somehow 'take away' from the learning of other students.

Confusion about the school's existing capacity to serve. A need for certainty. A desire to uphold the school's 'academic' reputation. Complacency, or contentment with the *status quo*.

Fear of setting a precedent that may have far reaching educational and financial implications.

Many of these reasons overlap, often working in conjunction with one another. In chapter two we discussed the nature of fixed and growth mindsets (Dweck, 2008), and the attributes of schools exhibiting such mindsets. Many of the reasons given for the exclusion of students are

characteristic of schools with fixed mindsets – schools that attribute their constraints and limitations to forces that they perceive to be outside of their control (limited professional expertise or resources).

For example, one of the easiest ways to uphold a school's reputation as an academically rigorous institution with good examination results is simply to restrict the type of student admitted. When enrolment is selective, the admissions policy is essentially a question of gate keeping - preserving examination results and entrance to prestigious universities that enhance the school's reputation. Our identity as a school is predicated on being learned, not on learning. Schools with collective fixed mindsets place a greater emphasis on *selecting* talent than on *developing* it.

There are times when schools may be disingenuous about their 'open' admissions. In one fairly large school we visited, the IB Diploma Programme coordinator very proudly told us that all students from the school, whoever wanted to, was admitted into the IB Diploma programme, and that for the last five years the school had maintained an average diploma point score of 38 (out of a possible maximum of 45).

We looked at one other with the same question: how is an average diploma point score of 38 possible to maintain with non-selective admissions? We later learned that students were being forceably exited at the middle school level. Several parents, some of them teachers, told us that their children had been exited before entry into the high school. Gate-keeping such as this can produce remarkable statistics, but does little to make schools collectively smarter. In fact, we see this as a form of cheating, a manipulation of numbers not too dissimilar to what transpired at Enron.

A fixed mindset causes an institution to become risk adverse. When a school exits students before high school or before the IB Diploma Programme, it suggests an unwillingness to take risks on children who might compromise the school's reputation and its high examination results.

A fixed mindset is evident when schools feel that they have to choose between being academically rigorous *or* being supportive of students with special educational needs. This is a false dichotomy. There is no need to choose between excellence and equity: we can have both (Tomlinson, 2003) and *be* both. As many flagship schools around the world are demonstrating, with the appropriate plans, structures and professional learning in place, we can provide an excellent and rigorous academic education for our students *and* be successful in our support of students with learning differences – a win-win situation.

In other situations, teachers and school leadership may be unaware of their own capacity for success, and may feel insecure about meeting the demands of working with students with special needs. Two students,

Amit and Ben, helped ISKL to discover its growing capacity to serve students with special learning needs.

What Amit and Ben taught the school

At an earlier point in the history of ISKL, the middle school faculty was faced with receiving two intensive needs students into grade six from the elementary school: a child who was wheelchair-bound with cerebral palsy, and another child with a developmental disability.

The middle school teachers balked. They complained that they didn't have the professional preparation or the expert knowledge or skills required to work with Amit or Ben (not their real names). If teachers had to focus so much time and energy on just these two children, how would this affect the learning of other children?

It wasn't fair or right for the regular students. The administration took the teachers' side and invoked a rarely used line in the board policy manual: that 'admission into one section of the school does not guarantee admission into the next section'. Amit and Ben were asked to find other school placements for the following academic year.

In the ensuing chaos that resulted, one of the parents ran for the board and was ultimately appointed board chair; the second parent took the school to court and won an injunction (accompanied by much negative

media scrutiny) against the school; two principals did not have their contracts renewed, and the head of school was fired.

To our knowledge, no head of school has ever been fired for being too inclusive. However, anecdotal evidence suggests the opposite to be true: heads of school are sometimes removed from their positions after a firestorm over the inclusion of special needs students. We have known several.

At ISKL, as teachers began working with Amit and Ben, and as their cases came up for review in student study team meetings, the middle school faculty slowly began to realize that both students, different as they were, were succeeding at school. ‘Success’ was measured in the social relationships the boys had with their peers, their success with academic work (some more limited than others), and their participation in extra- curricular activities. In short, were they happy at school? Were they learning? Were they growing as students?

Success was also measured by the increasing ease with which the faculty planned and handled their roles and responsibilities where these students were concerned. They were learning to differentiate instruction, and learning what could and couldn’t be differentiated in terms of the curriculum; the difference between an accommodation and a modification, and how to go about making these decisions.

The teachers were engaged in the all important business of *un-masking* success, both theirs as well as the students’. Within 18 months, the faculty thought it was ‘quite natural’ for students like Amit and Ben to be at the school. Their capacity to work with diverse learners had increased, and the organizational intelligence of the middle school was enhanced. The faculty had moved from having a fixed to a growth mindset in regard to working with students with special needs.

Matthew and the middle school

We are reminded of another admissions case in which a family with four children applied to a school; the children were applying for spaces at the early years level, the elementary school, middle school and high school respectively. The admissions for the high school and early years

children posed no problems and their admission was straightforward.

However, the children applying for elementary and middle school slots had intensive needs: both were late adoptees and had difficulties learning; previous report cards were full of the type of support that the children would need. The elementary school decision was to accept the child; given the structure of elementary classrooms, the principal thought they could manage the support the child needed.

But the middle school hesitated, and their first response was not to admit the child. The father, a senior employee from a major embassy, ran for the board of directors based on the admission of his other children – and was elected (as is often the case). He pressed the administration for the admission of his middle school child, and being wise to the political climate, the middle school made the prudent decision to accept Matthew (not his real name) into grade seven.

Teachers soon came to realize that Matthew had good social skills, and although he struggled academically, he ‘fit’ into the environment of the middle school. He had friends and he was working hard with a shadow teacher to meet the goals set in his individualized education plan (IEP). Teachers also worked to find expert knowledge and resources to support their instruction

At the end of term Matthew’s parents attended a meeting with the student study team to discuss Matthew’s progress and his settling into the school. Teachers were unanimous in their observation that Matthew had indeed made progress, and was considered ‘one of the boys’ in grade seven. All his teachers felt jointly responsible for his success in school. Furthermore, Matthew’s learning was being supported not only by his teachers and the shadow teacher who had been privately hired, but also by his peer group. Matthew’s progress was evident and measurable.

His parents were understandably pleased: “We knew this was the right place for Matthew, and you’ve shown us exactly that. Why didn’t you admit him in the first place?” Members of the SST tried to explain that they had originally felt that Matthew would probably have had better

access to the support and facilities available in the prestigious public school district that he had come from.

At that, Matthew's father exploded: "Please don't talk to me about sending kids to public school back home," he said. "I know what I'm talking about because we've just come from there. My children were in probably the best school district in the country and they were paid scant attention over the last two years.

"There was a lot of bureaucracy and a lot of paperwork to be done, a lot of hoops to jump through. It was almost March in their first year in the county before they received any help at all. International schools will do more for my children – just by the class size, the culture and the environment that you have here – than the schools they were in back home."

The experience of working with Matthew helped teachers at the school understand their capacity to work with children with special learning needs. Like the teachers at ISKL, they had developed a growth mindset.

It appears that children with special needs are here to stay and will remain a permanent feature of the international school landscape. Demographics have changed in the last few decades. Not long after the 1975 passage of Public Law 94-142 (otherwise known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act) in the United States and other similar laws in the English speaking world, parents of children with special learning needs began to take up expatriate positions.

Not only did they bring their children with them, they also came with the expectation that their children would be welcomed at the school of their choice. Whereas previously, international schools really perceived a 'choice' in whether or not to serve these children, parental pressure has become a growing reality that has served as a catalyst for change.

So, whether we like it or not, special needs children are with us. We can be sensitive to our environment (de Geus, 1997) and look for opportunities to grow, given our changing demographics, or like the ostrich, keep our heads in the ground. Even schools with the tightest selective admissions policies barring the entrance of students with

special educational needs will find that some will still make it past the admissions gate keeper. Perhaps they got through un-noticed or their learning difficulties may have surfaced later when the work became harder and more abstract. Even schools that explicitly deny children with special needs from enrolling may find surprises in their student populations.

So, how does a school become more open-minded? How does it develop a growth mindset and collective intelligence? Including students with special educational needs is one practical and explicit way of doing just that.

The AISJ story

The American International School of Johannesburg (AISJ) was recently faced with the opportunity to develop a growth mindset for serving children with special needs when a pre-school child with diagnosed disabilities on the autism spectrum applied for admission. The school's initial response was to reject Heather (not her real name), and the reasons given to the parents were that Heather had never been in an inclusive setting; that the school's recent attempts at inclusion had been challenging and not entirely successful; and that the school did not have the necessary supports in place.

After searching available resources in the Johannesburg area, Heather's parents found another placement for her, in a school that catered specifically for children on the autism spectrum. There were many benefits to this placement: there was a good therapist and Heather developed a positive relationship with her. Teachers were knowledgeable about autism and willing to learn about Heather's idiosyncrasies.

After some time, however, it became apparent that the academic program was not sufficiently challenging for Heather, and her social development stalled. Both parents and school recognized that Heather needed something more. With the school's support Heather's parents began the search for a new placement.

But this was a tough period for Heather and her family. Her parents

discovered there were long waiting lists for private schools and that state schools in the area were under-resourced and over-crowded. They did find some remedial schools but even these were unwilling to take on the challenge of autistic learners.

And then, almost by fate, Heather's parents re-applied for admission to AISJ, and this time their reception was different. They were met by the new admissions coordinator and elementary school counselor, who took them on a tour of the campus and decided to advocate for Heather. A team of teachers visited Heather at her school and a managed and planned program of integration was developed.

Heather and her parents made several visits to AISJ and to the class where she was to be assigned, to meet the teacher and her future classmates. The class teacher had volunteered to have Heather in her class and spent the summer reading and studying about autism. The school and parents agreed that this was to be a trial period and that Heather would attend AISJ in the mornings, for half a day, and continue her therapy in the afternoons at her other school.

Taking the risk of serving Heather and others like her and meeting their needs is one of the factors that has helped the school to re-examine its mission in light of service to children with special needs. AISJ is in the process of re-defining its identity and reviewing its values as a school. Their vision is to challenge themselves to provide a quality education for all students, including students who represent greater learning diversity. The school is endeavoring to be more inclusive and sees this as a learning process.

What we hope is becoming evident in this chapter is that often schools hesitate to become more inclusive because making the decision to embark on that journey is akin to traveling as explorers of a different era into uncharted territory. There is no 'one right and only way' towards changing a school culture to be more welcoming to diverse learners. Like traveling to the moon, there are many unknowns and perhaps even unanticipated hazards along the way. But the goal is worthwhile and in the process, the challenges will provide opportunities for growth and enhanced collective intelligence. The

journey begins with a decision, with open-mindedness, and in developing a will to serve.

The Next Frontier: Inclusion

Schools do not have to make this journey on their own. There are a number of international schools around the world that are already embarked on this journey, and many that are already sharing their learning at professional conversations hosted by The Next Frontier: Inclusion, an organization whose purpose is to support schools in becoming more inclusive. NFI is made up of a collaborative network of schools sharing a common belief that inclusion is the direction in which international education should grow. The goal is to realize one inclusive school in every major city around the world.

Inclusive schools (NFI, 2013) are defined as:

Schools that successfully serve a managed number of students representing the full range of learning differences: mild, moderate, and intensive needs, and the exceptionally able.

Some of the key terms in this definition are ‘successfully serve’, ‘a managed number’ and ‘representing the full range’. In other words, NFI does *not* advocate that schools accept all student applicants regardless of program availability, resources or student demographics. Inclusion does not mean that a child with Down Syndrome be placed in the same class as a student taking higher level math at the IB Diploma level.

NFI *does* advocate that schools carefully manage admissions to reflect the school’s will to serve and its growing faculty expertise. No class or grade level should be overwhelmed with large numbers of students with special needs. Instead, NFI (Pelletier, Bartlett, Powell & Kusuma-Powell, 2011) suggests that at each grade level, school populations reflect the general population at large: 10-12% of students with mild learning disabilities, 2- 3% with moderate learning disabilities, and 1% with intensive special learning needs. Generally speaking, the 1% with special learning needs will require a separate program.

Resources and other publications supportive of inclusion in international schools are available on the Next Frontier: Inclusion website: www.nextfrontierinclusion.org/ Schools that subscribe to NFI share the following belief statements:

High quality education is a basic human right of all children.

We need to redefine international education to be inclusive of students who learn differently or at different rates.

Parents who travel overseas should not have to leave some of their children behind or divide their families between schools.

We are committed to a planned and carefully managed approach to including students who have special needs or may be exceptionally capable.

The inclusion of children requiring learning support enhances the education of all children.

It is understood that schools will be at different developmental levels, at different stages in their respective journeys, in terms of their capacity to serve students with special needs. The important decision is to undertake the journey.

When we embrace the ‘hard’ goals – those that initially seem confusing, frightening, unrealistic or overwhelming, we engage individually and collectively in the process of redefining our professional identities. And when our values are clear, the decisions often take care of themselves.

Guided study questions

What might represent a ‘hard’ goal for your school? Under what conditions, could the pursuit of this goal enhance organizational intelligence?

The authors contend that the thoughtful inclusion of children with special learning needs requires a re-examination of our identity as an educational organization. In what ways is your schools currently

engaged in re-examining its identity?

How do school leaders go about developing both the *capacity* and the *will* to serve students with special educational needs?

What opportunities does your school have for ‘unmasking success’?

What does a collective growth mindset look and sound like? How do we go about developing collective Growth Mindsets in our schools?